JFK files reveal CIA scramble

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Agency sought to protect reputation in wake of assassination

WASHINGTON (AP) – Stamped "secret" for more than 30 years, the yellowed, dogeared documents on the Kennedy assassination tell a story of a CIA scrambling to protect its sources – and its reputation.

The nation's premiere spy agency had an extensive dossier on Lee Harvey Oswald. Almost from the moment the shots rang out killing John F. Kennedy, the damage control began.

"When the name of Lee Oswald was heard the effect was electric," one analyst wrote, recounting the atmosphere in CIA stations on Nov. 22, 1963.

In the CIA's possession was information covering Oswald's defection to the Soviet Union in 1959, his return to the United States in 1961 with a Russian wife, and his trip to Mexico City seven weeks before the assassination.

In the months that followed, the agency was under internal pressure to explain why it hadn't raised warning signals about Oswald to its domestic partner, the FBI.

"We do not participate in the actual work of protecting the President or planning his trips within the U.S.A.," one CIA report stated.

But as time wore on, the agency became increasingly concerned with a new problem – theories that it conspired to kill the president, according to an Associated Press review of documents at the National Archives.

One lengthy cable from CIA headquarters – entitled "PSYCH" – even went as far as to instruct chiefs of its foreign stations on ways to counter the burgeoning conspiracy theories.

"Conspiracy theories have frequently thrown suspicion on our organization, for example by falsely alleging that Lee Harvey Oswald worked for us. The aim of this dispatch is to provide material for countering and discrediting the claims," the cable said.

It suggested various countermeasures including the use of "propaganda assets" to plant book reviews and feature articles refuting the conspiracy theories.

Scores of other memos show an agency also anxious to protect the confidentiality of its sources and methods of gathering intelligence around the world.

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A memo dated March 23, 1964, to Richard Helms, then the CIA's deputy director for plans, recounts a meeting at the home of Allen Dulles, former CIA director and then a member of the Warren Commission.

"AWD (Dulles) showed me a letter he had received from (Lee) Rankin (Warren Commission's chief counsel) expressing the desire to reach a modus vivendi in order to allay the story of CIA's possible sponsorship of Oswald's activity," the memo states.

"The point of the communication to AWD was to suggest that he serve as CIA file reviewer for the commission."

The memo goes on to say that Dulles declined but offered to provide a statement that he had no knowledge of Oswald before the assassination.

One photograph, familiar to assassination buffs, generated a tremendous flow of letters and cables. It showed a heavyset man leaving the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City on Oct. 1, 1963, at the time when Oswald was there on his mysterious trip.

Various theories held the picture showed Oswald himself, or Jack Ruby, the man who shot Oswald to death in the basement of the Dallas jail. The Warren Commission wanted to publish the photo in its report.

What concerned the CIA was not the man in the picture but the wrought-iron fence in the background. Because Soviet agents would easily identify it as their own embassy, the CIA was concerned that its practice of photographing visitors there would be exposed.

A September 1964 CIA memo states: "Believe all real estate around target . . . would get very close attention and possibly some harassment."

CIA analyst Arthur E. Dooley wrote in another memo, "There is every indication, however, that by continuing to exert pressure, we will succeed in having the undesirable background material blurred sufficiently to make it unrecognizable."

The Warren Commission agreed to publish a cropped version of the photo.

Amid this secret negotiating, the agency was also confronting its first public criticism.

It came in the form of a syndicated column that accused the CIA of withholding from the Warren Commission a 1961 document detailing Soviet strategies in assassinating foreign leaders.

In an October 1964 memo to the CIA director, the agency's acting director of security, Harlan A. Westrell, wrote that only 32 copies of the top-secret report had been distributed.